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AUTHOR Doyle, Anna-Beth; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The use by 254 Canadian children of the dimensions of gender, language/ethnicity, and body type as bases of categorization was examined. A developmental approach was taken to see whether a sequence exists in the relative predominance of these dimensions; to examine the relation between the salience of these dimensions and cognitive developmental skills; and to assess the relation between dimensional salience and the acquisition of related stereotypes during middle childhood. Findings indicated that tendencies to classify by gender and body type were strongest in kindergarten, declining significantly between kindergarten and grade 2, and again between grades 1 and 5. In contrast, categorization by ethnic group remained constant between grades K and 6. Accuracy on conservation tasks, and knowledge of gender and overweight stereotypes increased from kindergarten to grade 1, the time at which categorization by these dimensions was strongest. It is concluded that these results support the hypothesis that children use categorization by social dimensions to acquire knowledge about the associated roles in their culture. Once these roles are acquired, the child may turn to new, not yet "mastered" dimensions as the dominant basis for classification. Gender and body type matches may decline as children become less focused on external, physical attributes, while ethnicity, perhaps perceived as a complex internal attribute, remains more predominant as a basis for classification. (RH)

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CATEGORIZING BY SOCIAL DIMENSIONS: A DEVELOPMENTAL BASIS FOR STEREOTYPING?

Anna-Beth Doyle, Lisa Serbin, Donna White[1],
Linda Rhodes, Judi Gulko and Rosemary Feltham
Concordia University

Recent studies suggest that young children initially acquire social stereotypes through the mechanism of categorization. As early as age two, children may begin to categorize on the basis of social dimensions such as gender, race, or age. By associating physical characteristics, activities and traits with these category systems, cultural stereotypes may be acquired. Little is known, however, about the relative salience of various social dimensions at different ages and in relation to cognitive developmental changes, or about the sequence in which children acquire the social stereotypes relevant to particular dimensions.

In the present study we examine developmentally children's use of three social dimensions: gender, language/ethnicity (French versus English Canadian), and body type (normal, overweight, underweight) as bases of categorization. A developmental approach was taken to see whether there is a sequence in the relative predominance of these dimensions, to examine the relation between the salience of these social dimensions and cognitive developmental skills, and to assess the relation between dimensional salience and the acquisition of related stereotypes during middle childhood.

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Subjects were 254 English-speaking boys and girls attending grades Kindergarten through 6 in a large Canadian city. Classification tests, based on the Gender Salience Test developed by Serbin and Sprafkin (1987) with 3 to 7 year olds, were constructed for each of the three social dimensions. In each test the child was asked to categorize pictures of children or adults by a variety of available dimensions. The child could choose to classify by the relevant social dimension (either gender, body type, or ethno-linguistic group), by an alternative dimension, such as activity, body posture or facial expression, or by neither. (See Figure 1.) There were 10 to 14 items on each test.

Concrete operational thinking skills were assessed using an adaptation of Form B of the Goldschmid and Bentler Concept Assessment Kit (1968). This measure was given only to children up to Grade 3 (n = 141) because in previous work many children had reached ceiling by that grade. The child was asked whether amounts of substance remained the same after as compared to before a transformation. Seven conservation tasks were administered: area, number, substance, continuous quantity, weight, discontinuous quantity and volume, in that order. A task received one point if a correct conservation answer with a partially or completely correct explanation was given. The total conservation score could therefore range from 0 to 7.

Tests of knowledge of gender stereotypes were adapted from Williams, Bennett and Best (1975) and the Sex-role Learning Inventory (Edelbrock and Sugawara, 1978). Similar measures of knowledge of body weight and ethnic stereotypes were not attempted because previous research indicated that children do not possess specific stereotypes about these dimensions.

Classification by gender and body type was strongest in the kindergarten children, declining significantly between kindergarten and Grade 2, and again between Grade 1 and Grade 5.

In contrast, classification by ethnolinguistic group remained fairly constant between Grades K and 6. (See Figure 2.) The three measures differed significantly in the pattern of changes with grade, $F(12,374)=3.01$, $p=.001$.

Guttman scalogram analyses confirmed a developmental sequence in the relation between mastery of elementary conservation tasks and the salience of gender for classification. That is, children tended to master the conservation of area and number prior to ceasing to categorize by gender, co-efficient of reproducibility .91 and co-efficient of scalability .77. However, no sequential relation was evident between conservation mastery and the drop in categorization by body-weight, reproducibility =.78, scalability =.52.

Knowledge of gender stereotypes increased rapidly from Grades K to 1, during which time categorization by gender was strongest. Guttman scalogram analysis indicated that on both the WBB and the Serli the acquisition of gender stereotypes preceded the drop in gender categorization. For the WBB the co-efficient of reproducibility was .97 and scalability was .87; for the Serli, the Guttman co-efficients were .90 and .61 respectively.

These results were interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that children may use categorization by social dimensions to acquire knowledge about the roles associated with those dimensions in their culture. Once these roles are acquired, the child may turn to new, not yet "mastered" dimensions as the dominant basis for classification. An alternative developmental perspective is that with age and cognitive development children focus less on external, physical features of peers and self and more on internal personality attributes (Damon and Hart, 1982; Livesley and Bromley, 1973). Thus, gender and body type matches may decline as children become less focused on external, physical attributes, while ethnicity, which children may perceive increasingly as a complex internal attribute as they mature, remains more

predominant as a basis for classification. Both of these hypotheses are worth pursuing in developing a comprehensive theory of social stereotyping in middle childhood.

References

Damon, W. & Hart, D. (1982). The development of self-understanding from infancy through adolescence. Child Development, 53, 841-864.

Livesley, W.J. & Bromley, D.B. (1973). Person perception in childhood and adolescence. London: Wiley.

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Figure 1: Example of Gender Matching Item

Gender Matching Alternatives:

Gender Matching Standard:

FIGURE 2: GENDER, BODY-WEIGHT AND LANGUAGE MATCHING SCORES (%) BY GRADE

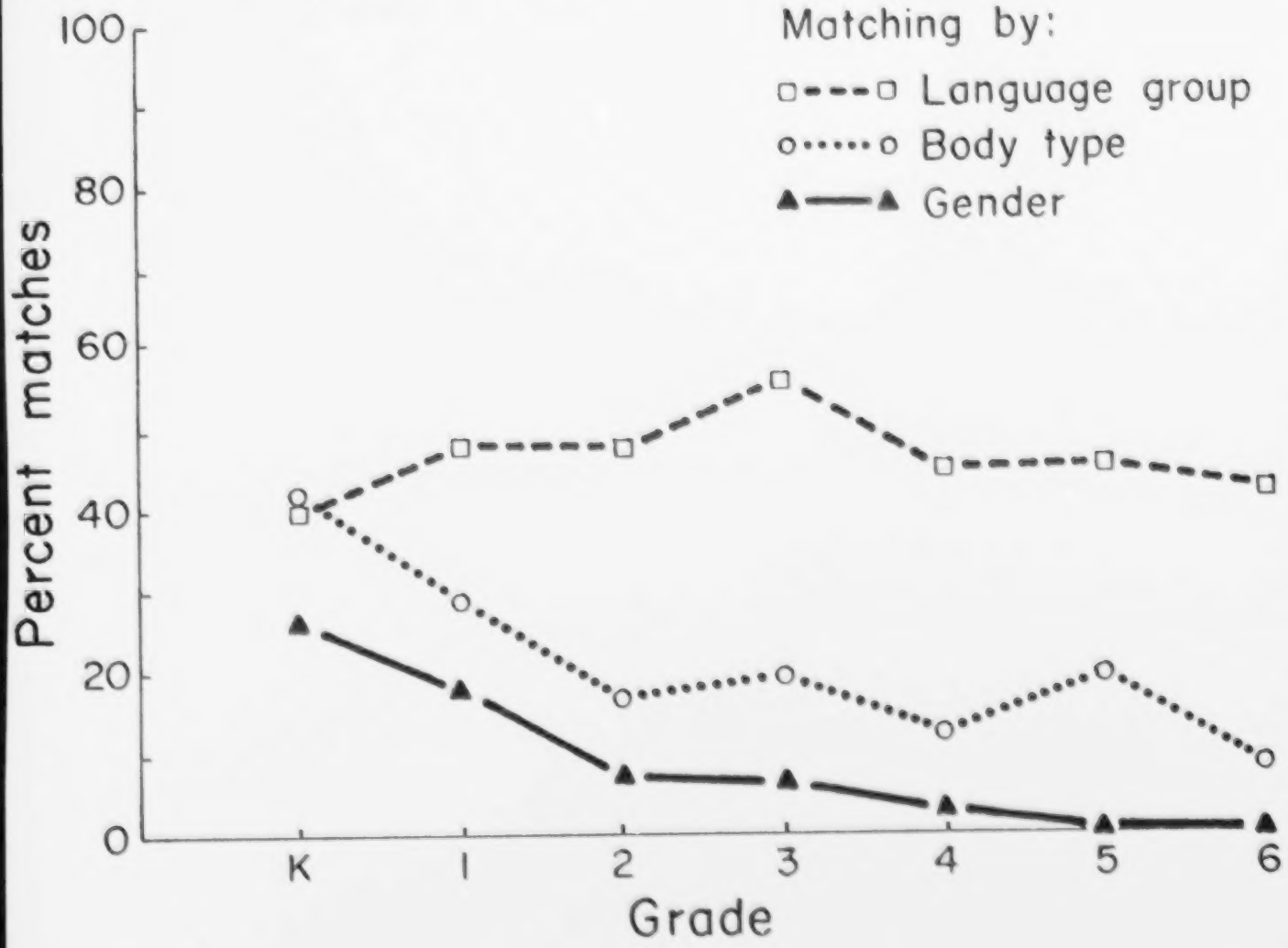

FIGURE 3: CONSERVATION, KNOWLEDGE OF GENDER STEREOTYPING, AND GENDER MATCHING SCORES BY GRADE